Making the Most of Your PDA

In recent years, PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) have become a staple for health care professionals. They are no longer considered just electronic calendars! There are four basic PDA functions: Address Book, Calendar, Memo Pad and To Do List. In addition, a wide variety of software can be added: document readers, Microsoft Word and Excel editors, games, databases, textbooks, etc. Several kinds of medical software are also available: drug databases, calculators, dictionaries, EBM (evidence-based medicine) tools, and diagnosis aids.

General Overview

The two major players in the PDA market are Palm and PocketPC (Microsoft). Each platform has a distinct look and feel. Palm's platform was designed specifically for handheld computers, while the PocketPC platform replicates the standard Windows look and functionality.

Which is better? That is a decision each individual PDA user makes. Currently, Palm has a larger percentage of the market share, but PocketPC has grown in popularity over the past couple of years. One major advantage to Palm in the medical environment is the abundance of quality freeware available.

PDAs are constantly evolving and becoming more compact and functional. Most have wireless capabilities, and some are combined with cell phones. The technology changes quickly, and most PDAs are out of date (but normally still usable) within two years.

The class taught at Ehrman Medical Library currently focuses only on the Palm platform PDAs.

Basic Functions

Entering Text

One of the first steps of learning how to use a PDA is learning how to enter text. There are several ways input text into your Palm:

- Graffiti
- On-screen keyboard
- Auxiliary keyboard
- Typing on your PC; synchronize

Graffiti is Palm's handwriting symbols. There are now two versions of Graffiti: the classic Graffiti, and Graffiti 2. Graffiti 2 is on new Palms (Operating System 5 and higher), and is a bit easier to use for novices. It takes a little getting used to if you've used classic Graffiti for awhile.

The on-screen keyboard can be accessed by tapping on the ABC or 123 in the Graffiti area of your Palm. Auxiliary keyboards are ideal for taking meeting notes or typing documents when traveling. However, the easiest way to input information into the Palm is to type it into your PC and then synchronize. This is especially true when you begin to add addresses to the Address Book, or have multiple calendar appointments to add.
Address Book

The Address Book serves two functions: a storage place for all of your contacts and an electronic business card.

It’s easy to set up your business card to beam to other PDA users:

- Add an entry for yourself
- Click on the top Contact Edit tab, or click the menu bar in the lower left side of the Graffiti area
- Choose Select Business Card
- You will be prompted to confirm that you want this entry to be your business card

To beam the business card to someone else with a PDA, simply hold down the Address Book function button or choose Beam Business Card from Contacts tab menu.

Calendar

The Palm Calendar is easy to learn. The default view on most Palms is the current day view. Choose the different icons in the lower left corner of the screen to see a weekly, monthly (on some versions), and yearly view. In the Details section, you can choose to add an alarm, category, and appointment frequency. Note that the calendar can be synced with MeetingMaker, Outlook, or other calendar programs that have a Palm “conduit” available.

Memo Pad and To Do List

These basic tools are good for keep track of tasks to complete and short documents or lists. Both functions, like the Address Book and Calendar, synchronize with your PC to keep your files current.

Medical Software

Medical software is available from a variety of sources. Like other kinds of software, medical software is available as freeware, shareware, or commercial products.

A handy resource for finding medical software online is the Library’s PDA toolkit:

http://library.med.nyu.edu/library/eresources/toolkits/pda.html

This site describes freeware available through the Library’s IR (Infrared) port, links directly to the software sites, instructions for using the IR port, resource sites, tutorials, and citations to the latest articles written about PDAs in medicine.

Some examples of medical software (freeware available through the Library’s IR port) are a Shots (immunization) chart, EBM calculators, a dictionary of eponyms, and a general medical calculator.

Help

For additional help with your PDA, take one of the Library’s PDA classes, visit the Library Information Desk, or contact a Reference Librarian at 212-263-8483 or searchwk@library.med.nyu.edu.